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## Under Pressure to Become – from a Student to Entrepreneurial Self

### Abstract

This paper discusses how entrepreneurial discourse and the idea of entrepreneurial self are internalized by university students and how they affect their thoughts about education-work transition and their ideas and feelings about their future. The data is gathered by applying visual and narrative methods. It is composed of reflection texts attached to pictures and empathy-based-stories written by students who are about to graduate from BA and MA programs in social sciences, humanities, business and administration at Universities of Tampere (Finland) and Barcelona (Spain). The analysis reveals that university students have internalized the entrepreneurial ethos but not uncritically. They question the economy-based work-oriented entrepreneurial self – discourse. Work and income are no longer trusted as grounds for good life. Although students wish for a steady income from a permanent job, they are very aware of the erratic reality. Consequently, they aspire after balance between work and life. They emphasize rootedness in a place and physically close social relations as the resources to cope with the uncertainties in the working life and society, and as the most important ingredients of good life. Perhaps the students are in the process of updating the components of good life to better match with the current reality.

Keywords: entrepreneurial self, university graduates, transition, working life, future plans, expectations

## Introduction

Experiences of becoming are strongly influenced by social, political and economic structures and institutions (France 2016, 2). In the current neoliberal context and discourse, (young) people are portrayed as flexible, creative, self-reliant and resilient individual managers of their own lives and careers whose success or failure is up to the level of their entrepreneurial mindset (Bröckling 2016). Yet, not much is known how entrepreneurial discourse has actually been internalized, whether it is questioned and how does it affect young peoples' thoughts about education-work transition and ideas about their future. This article seizes on these questions from the viewpoint of university students who are about to graduate from Bachelor's and Master's programmes in social sciences, humanities, business and administration at two European universities.

The article interlinks with the growing line of studies that pay attention to what young people actually think rather than what they do or don't do (see e.g. Atkinson 2010; Cairns, Growiec and de Almeida Alves 2014; Carabelli and Lyon 2016; Di Blasi et al. 2016; Mononen-Batista Costa and Brunila 2016). The discussion here is based on findings of a research that aims at giving voice to students' own thoughts, concerns and plans concerning their university-work transition and their expectations of and hopes for the future work and life.

Steven Roberts (2011) claims that studies of transition tend to focus either on those who stumble and fall or those who pass the transition with flying colours, and ignore the ordinary young people i.e. 'missing middle'. University students may be perceived as the 'elite' among their peers. Due to their high education (HE), they are

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3 expected to smoothly take their place in the labour market and succeed in terms of  
4 career and income development. It is true that HE graduates are better off in the labour  
5 market than those with low levels of education but HE is no longer a guarantee for a  
6 stable position in the labour market, for a upward career development and secure  
7 income (Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011; France 2016; Moreau and Leathwood 2007).  
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14 Today's university graduates are struggling with very different social and  
15 economic conditions from previous graduate generations. Although they are the best-  
16 educated generation in Europe ever and demographically the age groups are smaller  
17 than before, their transition to work life has become more difficult, complex and  
18 elongated (Mononen-Batista and Brunila 2016, 21). A growing number of European  
19 graduates find it difficult to find employment and especially such jobs that correspond  
20 to their studies (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017; Cairns, Growiec and de Almeida  
21 Alves 2014; Vuorinen-Lampila 2016). The financial crisis (2007-2008) and the  
22 economic downturn combined with austerity policies have accelerated this paradoxical  
23 development. Yet, in policy actions and discourse, education and especially HE  
24 continue to be regarded as the means to ensure and enhance individual's workability  
25 and employability, and as a societal remedy for future success in the global markets  
26 (Author and Tervonen-Gonçalves forthcoming).  
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43 In line with education and labour market policies, policy recommendations and  
44 strategies such as the Europe 2020 strategy, education has become an instrument for  
45 economic growth and for increasing productivity of work (Moreau and Leathwood  
46 2006; Vuorinen-Lampila 2016). The instrumental value of education seems to override  
47 the all-round cultivating value. In a same vein, practices of continuous, life-long  
48 learning and self-development has replaced the normative transition from education to  
49 work and from youth to adulthood. Paradoxically, self-development does not refer to  
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3 gaining better or deeper understanding or maturity but to skills that are easily salable,  
4 marketable and negotiable. What is the value of (higher) education to students'  
5 themselves? Is the diploma only a necessary requirement one has to fulfil in order to  
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10 edge towards the labour market or does it have some other bearing?  
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12 The article continues by reviewing the neoliberal discourse and the  
13 entrepreneurial ethos. Concepts of entrepreneurial self and entrepreneurial mindset  
14 capture the central idea of the ethos and the expectations imposed to (young) people.  
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presented as the means to unleash the potential of individuals in Europe (Author and Tervonen-Gonçalves forthcoming).

In the current neoliberal context and discourse, people are portrayed as flexible, creative, self-reliant and resilient individual managers of their own lives and careers whose success or failure is up to the level of their entrepreneurial spirit or mindset. The discourse of entrepreneurial self that is constructed and maintained by policies, strategies and recommendations does not tell (young) people what they are but what they ought to become (Bröckling 2016). Entrepreneurial mindset and all the '(a)bilities' (workability, employability, adaptability, flexibility, mobility) are about futurity (Adkins 2008). That is to say, that what one is expected to do and achieve is more important than what one already is able to do or have done (Nikunen 2016, 3). Thus, self-entrepreneur is never finished or ready. Further education and the need for personal growth becomes continuous and permanent (life-long learning). The need to self-optimize requires comparisons and comparison entails competition. Due to the constantly changing conditions, a person's position in relation to the other competitors is always temporary. The way to stay in competition is constant self-improvement and self-marketing. Working on self is working on one's work- and employability. Thus, being an entrepreneur is not what you do for living but an attitude to life (Bröckling 2016).

The problem with the discourse of entrepreneurial self is that it lose sight of social structures. It naively and simplistically presents the world as if we all were equal agents in free markets, like age, gender, ethnicity or social class have no effect what so ever. Unemployment, social exclusion, misfortune of any kind is your own failure. The reasoning defined by economic and market values form discursive practices in which social cohesion, inclusion and well-being are understood to result from one's

1  
2  
3 participation in work life (Mononen-Batista Costa and Brunila 2016.) How this  
4  
5 economy-based work oriented entrepreneurial self -discourse effect on university  
6  
7 students' thoughts, feelings and views about their university-work transition and their  
8  
9 future?  
10

## 11 12 13 14 **Data, Methods and Analysis** 15

16  
17  
18 How to study university students' own thoughts and feelings in the university  
19  
20 environment, and by a person belonging to the university staff? How to create an  
21  
22 unrestrained atmosphere and how do I, who train students to express themselves  
23  
24 according to academic conventions, encourage them to express their feelings and  
25  
26 innermost thoughts intuitively and freely, in a non-academic fashion? To overcome  
27  
28 these challenges I decided to apply the so-called creative methods. Creative methods are  
29  
30 said to enable people to communicate in a meaningful way about their identities and  
31  
32 experiences and their own thoughts through creatively making things themselves, and  
33  
34 then reflecting upon what they have made (Gauntlett and Holwarth 2006).  
35  
36

37  
38 As I am interested in students' thoughts and feelings about university-work  
39  
40 transition and their views of the future, I gathered the data applying visual methods.  
41  
42 According to Gillian Rose (2012), use of pictures facilitate 'mental' moving between  
43  
44 past, present and future. Use of pictures help to think and create new ways of seeing and  
45  
46 generates new perspectives and questions. First, I asked the students to choose a picture  
47  
48 that describes or reflects their thoughts and feelings that finishing studies and moving  
49  
50 into work life evokes in them, to title the picture, and to write a short reflection text  
51  
52 including information about the origin of the picture (data 1). It is worth noting, that it is  
53  
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not the pictures but the reflection texts attached to them that I analyse as data (see Tinkler 2013).

Second, I applied narrative methods and particularly empathy-based-stories to provide students an opportunity to use their own voice and to make their tacit knowledge visible. Empathy-based-stories are short imagined writings composed according to an introductory script provided by the researcher. The stories are possible stories about what may happen and what different things may mean. This method enables collecting contextual and timely bound cultural meanings and perspectives (Posti-Ahokas 2013). I asked students to imagine time three years after graduation when they are in work life and asked them to write a short (1-2 pages) story describing what kind of work they do in what kind of a work place and how their studies benefit them in their work (data 2). Students had two weeks to accomplish these two tasks and then I met them in groups and discussed about the issues that raised from the tasks. I did not record the group discussions but kept a research diary. The whole data analyzed here consist of reflection texts (data 1) and empathy-based-stories (data 2) written by 55 students amounting 86 A4 pages of text.

I collected the two data sets during the academic year 2014-15 at the Universities of Tampere, Finland and of Barcelona, Spain. 19 Master's degree students in social sciences and humanities in Tampere and 27 Bachelor's degree students and 9 Master's degree students in sociology, business and administration in Barcelona took part. In Barcelona, the groups were international having students from Spain but also from all the continents and around Europe. In Tampere, all the students were native Finns. Majority of the students were female in both universities. The average age for MA students was 28 and for BA students 21. The data is multilingual. The reflection texts and empathy-based-stories are written in Finnish, English and Spanish. The group

1  
2  
3 discussions were conducted in Finnish and English. Thus, some of the excerpts in the  
4  
5 article are my translations from Finnish and Spanish into English. I asked a written  
6  
7 permission from each student to use the texts and the pictures that were made or taken  
8  
9 by students themselves as a data for research and for academic presentations and  
10  
11 publications.  
12

13  
14 Despite the small size of the data, I find it rich and resonant with feelings,  
15  
16 thoughts, ideas and plans. Due to the heterogeneity of the sample, I am not able to make  
17  
18 any country, gender, age or discipline based comparisons. Because of this, and in order  
19  
20 to guarantee students' anonymity, I do not refer to students' disciplines, their nationality  
21  
22 nor whether they were students in Tampere or Barcelona at the time of the data  
23  
24 collection. The excerpts are accompanied with the information of students' gender and  
25  
26 age (F23 = female age 23, M23 = male age 23). I have analysed the reflection texts and  
27  
28 empathy-based-stories inductively by using content analysis to distinguish the recurring  
29  
30 themes in the data. Finally, I reflect the findings with discoveries of studies done among  
31  
32 graduates and about education-work transition in recent years.  
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### 39 **Transition from University to (Work) Life**

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44 Transitions are crossroads or milestones on the path of life, which direct and shape the  
45  
46 life course. Transitions are also potential moments for crisis and change (Marin 2001).  
47  
48 On one hand, it is a point in life that opens all kinds of possibilities and vistas of the  
49  
50 future. On the other hand, it evokes anxieties and concerns. University-work transition  
51  
52 is an important point in students' lives and it arouses range of mixed emotions. The  
53  
54 picture most often chosen to reflect the feelings connected with the transition is of a  
55  
56 cliff.  
57



[Picture 1 around here]

The rock represents my life as it is now; stable, predictable and with little responsibility. (...) Staying on a rock, however, will not lead to any progression; at some point I am forced to leap into the ocean (...) The ocean represents the working life of which I feel and think of as uncertain, hostile but also as nurturing in the sense that it offers many possibilities for me as a person. (...) (M 23)

Similar picture titled 'Free fall' presents a group of friends holding hands and jumping from a cliff to the sea while the sun is setting in the background. Attached to the picture, a student writes:

Before the scene they were standing together on the edge of the cliff, maybe holding hands. The water in front of them is deep and they don't know what's underneath. The cliff is really comfortable. This is how I experience university- I feel supported and I stand with two feet on the ground...but thinking about the whole application process for a job makes me feel like I am jumping off my safe

1  
2  
3 cliff. And I don't question the jump because my friends are with me but in the  
4  
5 air I cannot hold their hands, I have to make my own decisions. (F 23)  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 There were also more tranquil pictures of cliffs and thoughts about transition. In the  
11  
12 picture below, the student sits on a ledge looking at the open view over the city up to the  
13  
14 sea. According to her, this picture captures perfectly how she feels about finishing up  
15  
16 her studies: '...on top of a mountain with the world of opportunity in front of me'. She  
17  
18 continues: 'I am sitting on the background looking at all the beautiful things in front of  
19  
20 me, similar to how I feel about finishing college (...) I feel both overwhelmed slightly  
21  
22 but also excited as to the many prospects that lie ahead of me in my working career  
23  
24 (...)' (F 21)  
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30 [Picture 2 around here]  
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34 School, university, the education system is the 'solid ground' and what is about to  
35  
36 follow is a jump to unknown. Student life gives structure and purpose to life. It is  
37  
38 described as a relatively carefree time with fairly few responsibilities. As a student, you  
39  
40 are surrounded with like-minded people with similar interests and, more or less, at the  
41  
42 same life stage. The university and the peers are an important source of the sense of  
43  
44 security, but when the time of graduation comes and you should step out into the world  
45  
46 of work, you are on your own.  
47  
48  
49

50 Students in the data expressed a strong belief in higher education. To have the  
51  
52 degree is considered as the basic requirement one needs to fulfil when entering the  
53  
54 labour market. University degree is also regarded as key to interesting jobs. Education is  
55  
56 valued pragmatically and instrumentally because of the importance of educational  
57  
60

1  
2  
3 credentials, and because it is considered as the medium to achieve at least some sense of  
4 control over the future (see Wyn and Woodman 2006, 508). Yet, majority of the  
5 students also emphasised the importance of their studies to their personal growth, to  
6 their abilities to understand the world, other people and themselves.  
7  
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14 I think that knowledge cannot be valued for its “visible” consequences, I mean,  
15 knowledge has an inherent value and thanks to it you are the person you are.’  
16  
17 (F19)  
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### 26 ***Making Choices***

27  
28  
29

30 By and large the students are optimistic about their future, content with their studies and  
31 believe that their education will support them in their pursuits after graduation. They are  
32 not worried about finding employment after graduation. Instead, they worry about  
33 making a wrong choice and being blown off from the right career course.  
34  
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41 I am not afraid of not getting a job. I am more afraid of not taking the right path  
42 at the right time and maybe miss a great change. (F21)  
43  
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48 The idea of irreversibility of choices once made causes anxiety particularly among the  
49 younger students. This anxiety tends to ease with age and with life experience as the  
50 older students in their late 20s and 30s did not express such concerns. However, making  
51 choices relying if not merely, at least mainly on yourself is commonly found as a strain  
52 but also an opportunity and a source of freedom. Similar to studies conducted for  
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1  
2  
3 example among university students in Finland (Laalo and Heinonen 2016) and UK  
4  
5 (Moreau and Leathwood 2007), this data also indicates that the idea of individual  
6  
7 responsibility and expectation of self-reliance is well internalized:  
8  
9

10  
11  
12 I myself face the freedom of choice and I am responsible for the choices I make  
13  
14 and that I just have to take that as a challenge and as a big adventure. (F 31)  
15  
16

17  
18 I am the one responsible for what I am doing in the end and have to deal with  
19  
20 that. (F 24).  
21  
22

23  
24  
25 Most students wrote about self-reliance and individual responsibility quite matter-of-  
26  
27 factly. They recognise that this is what is expected and try to meet the expectations the  
28  
29 best they can. But, there are also those who do not feel so self-confident but try to  
30  
31 ‘train’ themselves to meet the criteria like this 26- year-old female student who writes:  
32  
33

34  
35  
36 It is important to me, a person who easily underestimate herself, to remember  
37  
38 that I do have special know-how and expertise and to try to believe in myself  
39  
40 even in a tight spot where my own ideas, wishes or values are questioned. (F 26)  
41  
42

43  
44  
45 Majority of the students in the data are quite confident and believe in their abilities to  
46  
47 take charge of their own lives. Some have adopted the ‘Me Inc. ethos’ (see Bröklings  
48  
49 2016) so well that like the dominant discourse, they have lost sight of the surrounding  
50  
51 society and the frameworks and conditions that affect in individual’s free choices: ‘(...) everything is up to me; where I work, how hard I work and what level of success I  
52  
53 would achieve.’ (F 21).  
54  
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1  
2  
3 There are also more critical voices pondering how the existing social and  
4 economic circumstances and such personal traits as social class, gender and ethnicity  
5 effect on individual's chances in work and life (see e.g. Moreau and Leathwood 2006).  
6  
7

8  
9 Like this student, they recognize that in reality everything is not completely up to her:  
10  
11  
12

13 I see the future full of opportunities but (...) You can try to build a bridge or  
14  
15 jump hoping that you'll not get hurt (...) Lucky people jump and they arrive to  
16  
17 the place they want, they have a parachute (money). Then there are people like  
18  
19 me who have to build their own bridge (e.g. university degree and diplomas).  
20  
21 The problem is that in this country the building materials are expensive and  
22  
23  
24 resources are lacking. That's why having people you trust and love by your side  
25  
26 is useful because they can help you to build the bridge or prevent you from  
27  
28 falling. (F 19)  
29  
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33 Many emphasise positive attitude as the key. Even if you feel a bit intimidated by the  
34  
35 world of work, future and responsibilities, things will work out if you stay positive,  
36  
37 about not only yourself but about life in general. Yet optimism and positive attitude  
38  
39 should not lead you astride as this 21-year-old female student points out: 'But despite  
40  
41 the fact that I try to be optimistic I also try to be realistic because these are hard times  
42  
43  
44 for dreamers'.  
45  
46  
47

#### 48 **Do I Find My Place in the Labour Market?** 49 50 51 52

53 Students express a strong belief in the value of the university degree in the labour  
54  
55 market. All, except one who wish to have chosen a more practical career, are happy  
56  
57 with their chosen field of studies and feel that they have learned such skills and gained

1  
2  
3 knowledge that will benefit and help them in the working life. However, students are  
4  
5 not naïve but recognize that the degree guarantees nothing and the competition among  
6  
7 degree holders is tuff in the labour market.

8  
9 The media, current economic and political discourse and education policies  
10  
11 generate a work- and career-centred world where a person's worth is measured by her  
12  
13 employability and her capacity and willingness to constantly improve and enhance her  
14  
15 tradeable skills, and adjust to continuously changing labour markets (Brökling 2016;  
16  
17 Mononen-Batista Costa and Brunila 2016; Moreau and Leathwood 2006). This ethos  
18  
19 has not gone unnoticed among the students. The (work)career-centred ethos combined  
20  
21 with the other tenet of our time, the individual freedom, arouses preoccupations.  
22  
23

24  
25 This is the problem of our generation. You can be anything you want so you  
26  
27 have to force yourself to create your own personality. It is pretty hard when you  
28  
29 don't know for what. I feel like a jelly: always flexible, not shaped, insecure (...)  
30  
31 (F26)  
32  
33  
34  
35

36 According to the students, it is not a problem to find a job. However, finding a job  
37  
38 matching with one's education, and which is interesting, demanding and challenging  
39  
40 enough may turn out to be problematic.  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 I fear of not being able to work with something related to my studies. (F 20)  
46  
47  
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49  
50 I wonder if I'll ever get an interesting and permanent job. At the same time I  
51  
52 would already like to work somewhere else than at the checkout in a grocery  
53  
54 shop (where I am now). (F 25).  
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3 Many university students work while they study, often in jobs that are not related to  
4 their studies, like the student in the above quotation. Students have experience of wage  
5 work which may contribute to the notion that you are able to get a job, but  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10 understandably university graduates who have invested in their education and their  
11  
12 employability are not satisfied with just a job. The students provide a long list of  
13  
14 attributes for the dream job. It ought to be matching with studies, interesting and  
15  
16 challenging enough. It should allow living according to one's values and providing  
17  
18 possibilities for personal growth, and as a very important factor, social relations with  
19  
20  
21 colleagues and work mates should be good and respectful. Students look for The Job  
22  
23 but to figure out what The Job might be is not straightforward as a student writes  
24  
25 attached to a picture of Edward Munch's painting The Scream:

26  
27 Today we are supposed not only to have a job but a job that is at the same time a  
28  
29  
30 passion. This pressure blocks any constructive ideas! (F23)  
31

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33  
34 Another common worry has to do with uncertainties in the labour market as a student  
35  
36 formulated in the quotation below:

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41 On one hand I dislike the idea that I have to push my life aside because of the  
42  
43 work career. On the other hand, I fear that I don't even have an access to stable  
44  
45 work career but have to drift in uncertainty where fluctuating periods of  
46  
47 unemployment alternate with short project-natured jobs. (M 27).  
48  
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52 It is a well-known fact that the jobs, even the ones fitting with studies, are most likely  
53  
54 temporary, short-term and project-natured. Nevertheless, many hope and dream for  
55  
56 open-ended contracts and permanent positions with fixed working hours and an office  
57

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3 of one's own. When the above quoted student imagines his situation three years after  
4 graduation he sees himself working full-time with an open-ended contract as an expert  
5 in a public sector. He has his own office and fixed office hours from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. He  
6 continues:  
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13  
14 (...) although many of my tasks are project-natured, I am able to leave the work  
15 in the office - I am not reading e-mails in my free time. Permanent, stabile job  
16 balances the stress and rush at work. (M 27)  
17  
18  
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23 The uncertainty that fixed-term, part-time and project-natured jobs create is manifested  
24 also in the reflections about the future standard of living. High incomes, big houses, and  
25 luxury in their lives are not on the top of the wish list. Instead, students contemplate  
26 whether they could earn enough to live ordinary and comfortable life, like: '(...) to be  
27 able to live in a studio or one-bedroom apartment, to be able to have a holiday, perhaps  
28 abroad once or twice a year and not to count your pennies when doing the groceries.' (F  
29 25)  
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38 Students picture the labour market as very competitive and uncertain. To be able  
39 to compete with the other degree holders and with those who already are in the labour  
40 market requires self-promoting and –marketing. The concern is that in the process you  
41 will lose your principles and values as you should sell yourself and your skills in  
42 whichever kind of a package the prospective employer requires in any given time. A  
43 student describes how working in creative field is 'grotesque' and this grotesqueness  
44 influences in one's identity negatively:  
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3 (...) because the jobs you get to do are not what they supposed to be. In other  
4  
5 words, the work appears largely to be making funding applications, to foist  
6  
7 yourself and to hoard contacts rather than concentrating on the core of the matter  
8  
9 that is studying and creating music. (M 30)  
10  
11  
12  
13

14 Losing yourself and misplacing the focus from the heart of the matter, whatever it is  
15  
16 that you work with, is a common concern among the students. Younger students  
17  
18 particularly think, perhaps somewhat idealistically, that the solution to this problem  
19  
20 would be to start an own enterprise or organization where you can work with the issues  
21  
22 important to you and stay true to your values. For others, freelancer spirited students,  
23  
24 the uncertainty and the requirements to be flexible, agile and able to package and sell  
25  
26 yourself and your skills– ‘to invent your own career’ as a student put it, do not cause  
27  
28 anxiety but rather motivate and inspire.  
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34 Work projects will be short. It might be quite weary. Fortunately, I am not on  
35  
36 one card. As I am able to play (music), at a pinch I can teach or do gigs! One has  
37  
38 to seize an opportunity when it tugs! Then you feel that you are again on the  
39  
40 move towards the familiar unknown! (M33).  
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#### 48 **Am I Able to Balance between Work and Life?** 49 50 51

52 Uncertainty of labour markets is closely related to the ability to balance between work  
53  
54 and life, a topic that occupies every students’ minds. In her research on female  
55  
56 experiences of precarious work and entrepreneurial mindset, Hanna Ikonen (2013, 474)  
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3 points out how achieving the active self-sustained agency demanded by the current  
4  
5 labour market requires continuous search for a balance between a living wage, well-  
6  
7 being and the limits of endurance. This is precisely the preoccupation of the students  
8  
9 irrespective of gender. Thus, the dream job for many is not only permanent but also  
10  
11 such that facilitates combining work and family/caring duties, like one student writes  
12  
13 when imagining her working life three years after graduation:  
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18 I have a permanent job with long paid holidays at the same time with  
19  
20 children's school holidays and no work in the evenings or nights (...) I have a  
21  
22 possibility to work also from home and shorter time as I have children in  
23  
24 primary school (...) I have a well-established employer and I don't have to  
25  
26 worry about lay-offs or dismissals (...) (F 40)  
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31 She is a student who is a mother of small children and she imagines her future in very  
32  
33 concrete terms. Most students are younger and without similar parental concerns, but  
34  
35 practically all of them are afraid that the world of work will be all-consuming.  
36  
37 Alarming many dread burnout even before they have actually entered the labour  
38  
39 market (see also Aronson, Callahan and Davis 2015; France 2016). Based on the data,  
40  
41 one of the biggest challenges in future is to find the balance in life: to be able to acquire  
42  
43 and do meaningful, challenging and demanding work while also being able to maintain  
44  
45 close social relations and have time for family, a partner and friends, and to have time  
46  
47 also for yourself.  
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3 Nowadays most people are living for the work or for the obligations without  
4 taking time for themselves, but I don't want my work to be completely my life.  
5  
6 (F 20)  
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11  
12 I am torn between my perfectionism of doing a good job and my vision of life of  
13 not being a workaholic. (...) I am thinking about establishing my own company  
14 but I am a daughter of a workaholic mother – do I really want my kid's life to be  
15 like this? I want to believe that I can do both, but even if it's possible it's going  
16 to be stressful – do I want that? (F23)  
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24 Although work is important to me I don't want it to be the centre of my life -  
25 there has to be place also for my partner and other close relationships. (F 23)  
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32 Finding balance is about coping with ambitions, and contradicting responsibilities and  
33 demands. It is also about having a decent life: work life where people working together  
34 respect one another and life where work is a significant but only one part of it. Nearly  
35 all students in the data emphasise the importance of good social relations both at work  
36 and in private life. Good relations with colleagues at the work place is one of the most  
37 important aspects of The Job. Likewise, close relationships with friends and family are  
38 the most important elements in balanced life and the source of coping with insecure,  
39 demanding and hectic (working) life. Majority of students emphasise how close social  
40 relations, frequent face-to-face interaction with family and friends and putting down  
41 roots is paramount to individual well-being. Strong emphasis on feel of rootedness and  
42 staying put does not fit well with the expectations of being mobile and thus maximising  
43 one's employability. Based on this data, moving after a job within a country or between  
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3 countries might be an option in the early stage of the work career and before starting a  
4 family. None of the students in this sample plan to build a mobile career and have  
5 mobile way of life, not even those who themselves were mobile exchange students at  
6 the time of data collection. Instead, they wish that in the future they would to be able to  
7 stay put and have 'normal' life.  
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## 17 **Conclusions and Discussion**

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21 University–work transition raises thoughts about responsibility and choice. Stepping out  
22 from the structured world of education to the world where social structures no longer  
23 offer predictable paths for future life evokes anxieties about ones' capabilities to make  
24 the individual choices and to be self-reliant. Several studies done in western countries  
25 like Australia, Finland and Spain note increased acceptance of personal responsibility  
26 among (young) people (Wyn and Woodman 2006; Laalo and Heinonen 2016;  
27 Mononen-Batista Costa and Brunila 2016; Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017).  
28 Under the current neoliberal context and discourse promoting the idea of entrepreneurial  
29 self, it is reasonable to ponder whether the students have any other options but embrace  
30 the idea of being managers of one's lives (Bröckling 2016). This study indicates that  
31 students have acknowledged the expectations and demands of entrepreneurial self. They  
32 clearly know that they ought to be workable, adaptable, agile, flexible and mobile. They  
33 do believe in higher education and in its worth in the labour market. They have invested  
34 in their workability and self-development, and are willing to continue to do so but they  
35 wish they could do it in their own terms. In other words, students hope for strong  
36 agency.  
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3 Although majority of the students are quite positive about their future prospects  
4  
5 in working life, they realise that their work careers will most likely be composed of  
6  
7 fixed-term jobs, assignments and projects. Nevertheless, they hope to maintain steady  
8  
9 income regardless of changing assignments and projects. As the labour markets are in a  
10  
11 state of flux, staying in the markets requires constant promotion of yourself and your  
12  
13 ability-package. This is also an internalised state of affairs but what most students hope  
14  
15 for is the ability to decide themselves what abilities to sell, how and to whom instead of  
16  
17 converting oneself into a package determined by the needs and values of fluid markets  
18  
19 and varying employers.  
20  
21

22  
23 The most criticised ability is mobility. Life as an expert-nomad who creates her  
24  
25 working career following the job opportunities around the European Union or world  
26  
27 does not seem to attract students. Working abroad would be an option for some in the  
28  
29 early stage of the work career. For others moving abroad after a job appears as a very  
30  
31 probable necessity in near future. As a study among Portuguese tertiary-educated youth  
32  
33 indicates, moving abroad is an important and sometimes the only option to look for a  
34  
35 job and decent livelihood but there is no sign of a major youth exodus (Cairns, Growiec  
36  
37 and de Almeida Alves 2014, 1057). Cairns and others claim that even in the crisis-hit  
38  
39 European societies like Portugal, Spain and Ireland, thinking about moving abroad is a  
40  
41 form of escapism rather than a realistic option (Cairns, Growiec and Smyth 2012).  
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45 Mobility is not only about personal choices or a necessary way to make a living.  
46  
47 Just like the idea of entrepreneurial self, demand of educational and career mobility is  
48  
49 based on the delusive idea of equality. However, not everybody has the same chances to  
50  
51 be mobile, as Beverly Skeggs (2004) points out. Those with financial means can leave  
52  
53 and move around if they so wish. Thus, whether being mobile or staying put, and  
54  
55 whether to be mobile out of free will or of necessity is also a question of social class.  
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3 Although students do not explicitly bring forth the class perspective, some ponder  
4 connections between opportunities and constraints stemming from social, family or  
5 local backgrounds. None of the students in this study planned for mobile life-style and  
6  
7 the main argument against it was not background but the conviction that continual  
8 mobility is detrimental for the individual well-being and for attaining balance in life –  
9 both highly valued aspects in life.  
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16 In face of uncertainty and change, putting down roots, staying put and being  
17 close to those important to you become important aspects in life. Just like for the  
18  
19 Australian young people in the study of Johanna Wyn and Dan Woodman (2006), social  
20 relationships play a very important mediating role in building a life, achieving well-  
21 being and finding the balance also for the students in this data. Good and respectful  
22 relationships both in private life and in working life are seen as the most important  
23 resources to cope with uncertainty. Trusted others provide material and most of all  
24 immaterial (emotional, social and cultural) resources to succeed in life. What is  
25 especially emphasised in connection to social relationships is the importance of physical  
26 closeness with the important people be they family, a partner, friends or colleagues.  
27  
28 Staying in touch via Skype and other ways provided by the modern communication  
29 technology does not suffice. Physical closeness and ability to communicate face to face  
30 requires staying put. Descriptive of this is how the students talk about roots and  
31 emphasise how important it is for personal well-being to have the feel of belonging to a  
32 place and to its people.  
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49 Research (e.g. Aronson, Callahan and Davis 2015; Wyn and Woodman 2006)  
50 has shown how young people prioritize achieving a balance in their lives and this study  
51 is no exception. The biggest concern among the students is whether they are able to find  
52 balance between work life and private life and to have time also for themselves. This  
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3 concern is very much related to the nature of contemporary work. Young people like the  
4  
5 university students here have accepted, more or less willingly, that they will have many  
6  
7 jobs and probably several occupations during their lifetime. They know that even the  
8  
9 employment fitting with their studies is most likely precarious (see Wyn and Woodman  
10  
11 2006). As they have invested in their work- and employabilities, they consider work as  
12  
13 an important aspect of their lives not only financially but also personally. Yet, work is  
14  
15 not regarded as a reliable basis for meaningful life. Consequently, the students in this  
16  
17 study criticise the extremely work-oriented ethos of our times and emphasize the  
18  
19 permanence of place and people.  
20  
21

22  
23 What the university students have set their sights on is balanced, ‘ordinary’ life  
24  
25 where rewarding and interesting work and relatively steady and sufficient income is  
26  
27 combined with rich and physically close social and private life. Is this a realistic aim for  
28  
29 the future or is this a mere fantasy of the good life?  
30  
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32  
33 Lauren Berlant (2011) claims that our ideas of good life are no longer  
34  
35 sustainable and attainable in the present. According to her, the idea of good life that we  
36  
37 so eagerly cling to is related to upward mobility, job security, political and social  
38  
39 equality and durable intimacy, the criteria we should meet in order to make up a  
40  
41 meaningful life in capitalist-liberal societies. Yet, at the same time, society can no  
42  
43 longer provide us opportunities to fully meet these criteria.  
44

45  
46 The economic idea that assumes a clear connection between investment in  
47  
48 human capital (education) and life-long economic awards in the form of secure  
49  
50 employment, high incomes and possible upward social mobility has stood for half a  
51  
52 century and achieved a ‘common-sense’ status (Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017, 89-  
53  
54 90). The university students have bought the human capital model as they have invested  
55  
56 heavily on their education and they express a strong belief in the value of their high  
57

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3 education and diplomas in the labour market. Yet, they are also aware that the human  
4  
5 capital model no longer works in a way it used to. They know that their university  
6  
7 degree guarantees nothing. They do not really dare to expect to get a permanent, secure  
8  
9 job and steady, not mention, high income. Yet, the awareness of the reality does not  
10  
11 prevent them from hoping. According to Berlant (2011), this discrepancy is an example  
12  
13 of cruel optimism that occurs when we desire or promote something that actually  
14  
15 prevents us to flourish. Does hoping prevent these students from flourishing? The  
16  
17 students see themselves and their peers in a more complex way than they are often  
18  
19 given credit for (see Bessant, Farthing and Watts 2017, 125-143) and they are not naïve.  
20  
21 So, instead of living in a state of cruel optimism, perhaps they are in fact redefining the  
22  
23 criteria for good life, criteria that is better fitting with the current reality.  
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Picture 1. Make the jump

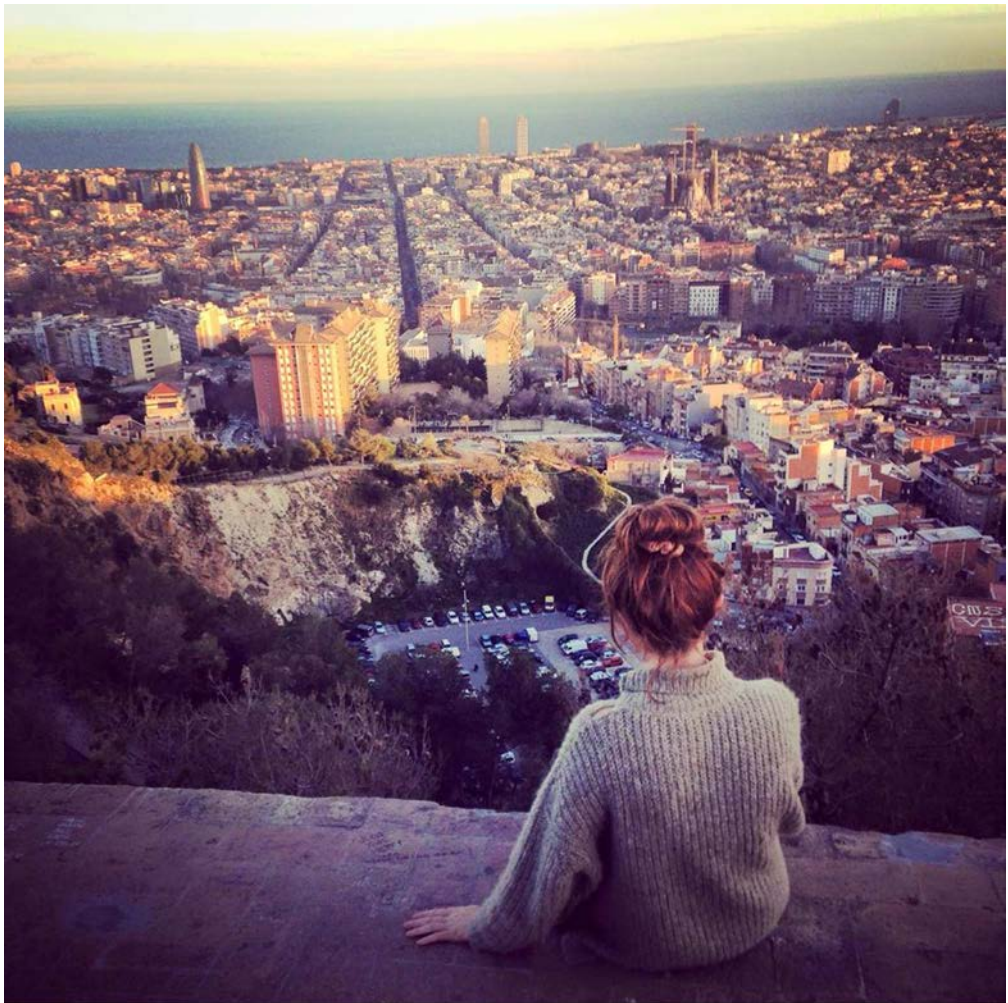
Student's permission to use his picture in an academic publication.

Picture 2. What lies ahead

Student's permission to use her picture in an academic publication.



Making the jump  
71x114mm (150 x 150 DPI)



What lies ahead

338x338mm (72 x 72 DPI)